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POST IMPRESSIONISM

It is a common reproach on our present-day culture that we are failing to produce any great works of art. Needless to say, this is a serious indictment. The true flower of any civilization is revealed in its art. Have we not reason, then, to be concerned about the validity of this accusation? Evidence, of course, is hard to procure, and any true perspective is for us impossible. But how many other periods have misjudged themselves! We may even doubt, with Whistler, if there ever was an 'artistic period.' All we can say with assurance is that art has happened now and again. Time wipes away the pseudo-artistic, while that which possesses merit survives.

So it may be with our own times. At any rate, we should not judge by the mass of commonplace and ephemeral productions which make up the list of 'best sellers' in books, which crowd our theatres, concert-halls, and art-galleries. If we would attempt anything approaching an accurate judgment of contemporary art, we must search for the few who are struggling for expression in new fields—impelled forward by new ideas—and must try to evaluate their work with sympathy and intelligence alike. Ripe judgment of the masterpiece is not for us but for the future. Only time can tell what shall survive, only time can answer in full the question of our artistic achievement. But there is no good reason why we should not discern the trend of modern endeavor and, in a measure, forecast the future of an art. Careful scrutiny and impartial mind should dictate our method, for this task is surely the true function of the critic.

As it happens, a good deal of interest is now being aroused in a school of painting which has been dubbed *Post Impressionism*. The movement is not a new one. Paris has known it in a definite form for more than twenty years in the varied expressions of a group of "independents" headed by the veterans Cézanne, Gauguin, and Van Gogh. Germany has been greatly influenced by its *Secessionists* for a scarcely shorter time. Only in conservative England and remote America is the movement just

now meeting the consideration which its efforts have warranted in other lands. Yet we may as well confess at once that nowhere has this attempt to break the shackles of tradition met with any such recognition as to justify its acceptance among orthodox artists and amateurs. The average critic still ranks it among the fads of erratic genius and commercially-minded art-dealers.

But the movement has not died as so many others have done—the Pre-Raphaelite movement, for instance, and the *art nouveau*, with its perverse craftsmanship. On the contrary, its productions are becoming increasingly conspicuous. Interest in its theories and practices is becoming day by day more evident. We need have no fear of being accused of attempting to galvanize into life the still-born productions of a degenerate fancy. For whatever may be urged against these works, it cannot be denied that they are teeming with vitality. What more may be said in their favor as a permanent contribution to representative art?

In the first place, we must clear away that prejudice which sees beauty only in its accustomed place. Two things which at once impress the casual observer of these bizarre productions are the absence of any attempt to depict the 'beautiful,' and the frankly unfinished look of the canvases. We shall allow our discussion to hinge in the main upon these two points. Concerning the first, the battle was waged loud and long, but there are many evidences that the innovators are winning the day. To Rodin, perhaps, more than to any other artist of the last generation, has been due the achievement of enlarging our grasp on the true nature of beauty. "Pour l'artiste digne de ce nom," he tells us, "tout est beau dans la nature, parce que ses yeux, acceptant intrépidement toute vérité extérieure, y lisent sans peine, comme à livre ouvert, toute vérité intérieure."

Only with the greatest difficulty, however, has æsthetic theory succeeded in convincing the devotees of art that a true and universal beauty may reside in the work of the artist quite regardless of the presence or absence of any intrinsic beauty in the subject which he is depicting. It required a drastic measure to drive home this important truth, and the ultra-realists in literature, notably Zola, have rendered valiant service in this cause. Little by little we have come to realize that a feeling of

pleasure is *not* the essential feature in an æsthetic experience. In literature it has always been evident that such a doctrine was far too narrow to admit an adequate interpretation of the tragic. Aristotle realized the fallacy of such a view, and corrected it in his theory of æsthetic *Katharsis*. Only in painting and sculpture has it been held up to the artist as a first consideration that he should please his audience with a reflection of things which could at once be grasped as types of perfection. But our independents will have no more of this. Pictorial art is for them as broad a field from which to appeal to feeling, imagination, and understanding as that which is assigned to literature. They are firm in the belief that they must break with academic tradition in order that they may take advantage of the manifold opportunities of expression which hitherto have been denied them.

The first step on the way toward this wider reach was taken by the Impressionists. But it is questionable if impressionism, as it is generally understood, introduced into pictorial art anything essentially new except certain scientific discoveries. It discovered, first, the use of contrasting colors to enhance form-values. In noting that the contrasting color always pervades the shadow cast by an object, and that in nature the distant vistas are enveloped in a purplish haze—as contrasted with the predominant greens and yellows of the foreground—the Impressionists proceeded to revolutionize preëxisting conceptions of aerial perspective and atmospheric effects generally. They discovered also that by placing raw, opaque colors in close juxtaposition, a fusion could be effected by the eye, at a certain distance, which would leave the resultant combination quite as brilliant as were the original colors; whereas when the colors are mixed on the palette the combination suffers a considerable loss in vividness—mixed colors being invariably dull and muddy. The art of landscape painting, where values of light and color play so large a part, owes its true inspiration to these discoveries.

But the Post Impressionists have not contented themselves with such technical devices for capturing and idealizing upon nature's effects. They have devoted their attention, not so much to the means of producing 'effects,' which always have

about them an element of instability and transience, as to the means of fixing a type or symbol. It is here that their work indicates so marked a variation from the orthodox productions of the Academies. Finding no necessity for adherence to those types of figure and situation which have become the stock material of the studios, they have seen the possibility, by enlarging their range, of depicting even abstract truths by means of symbolic expressions.

Yet it is not to the strange and freakish in nature that they go for their suggestions. On the contrary, the truths which attract them are suggested by the most ordinary and frequent objects of daily experience. Their symbolism is therefore a very concrete one, and their truths are vibrant with life. Not in the ideal figure of a nymph, or in the carefully wrought portrait of some psychological type do they find that suggestion of character which makes the artistic study of humanity a constant source of inspiration. But rather do they find it in a far simpler and, as it were, more naïve exposition of a type drawn with much greater emphasis upon fundamental lines and surfaces than upon those details of lineament which nature suggests in such complex abundance. The result may be distorted as a figure, and ugly as an object, but it is real and true as an expression. This is the secret of their perversity. It is not that they care for the representation of the ugly because it is ugly, nor that they seek wilfully to distort nature. Only a superficial view can so interpret it. What is aimed at is rather the depiction of an object, whether ugly or no, because of the beauty of its simple and expressive truth. And this involves just such a selection of material, and just such a distortion of the object as may be necessary to emphasize this truth.

We may now consider the second point of criticism which has been aimed at these artists, namely, the apparent incompleteness of their work. To understand this we must probe a little deeper into the artistic attitude of these painters.

The Lord Jesus in one of His most profound utterances said: "Except ye become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of Heaven." There is a world of philosophy condensed into this brief statement, and the truth of it is one

which your obvious-minded person is always slow to see. Pictorial art is said to deal primarily with the representation of things seen. For this reason it has often been regarded as an artistic virtue to see as much as possible, and to render accordingly. But one need not go far on this line of argument to realize that imitation, however minute and clever it may be, ends simply in stultification. The result can never be aught more than a sham and a delusion. The function of art, surely, is quite other than this. Representation is no doubt the *method* of painting, but not for the sake of being true to nature. The artist's problem is, rather, to be true to the minds to which he makes his appeal. The model which he selects is always before him, and may be observed and studied with the greatest care; but this fact does not signify that he must represent its every detail in an attempt to compress it all into a single glance. We have abundant evidence to prove that what we actually see when we look at an object is far less than that which we suppose we see. And yet, if we were to represent only that which we sense at a glance, the result would be so surprisingly meagre that in many cases it would be quite unintelligible to us. What is needed to interpret these bits which the eye has gleaned consists in certain clues which are furnished by our preceding attitude and thought. Without these, nothing that we see has any meaning for us.

Now the artist gives us a view without a past. We are simply confronted by it and asked to understand it. Evidently a picture is quite a different thing from a momentary glance which finds its proper place only in a sequence of relevant experiences. The meaning of experience is given in successive states of mind; the visual factors are but elements in a chain of thought. A picture, however, must contain its meaning within itself. In consequence of this, the picture is something quite different from a casual view of nature. But it is also different from a photographic transcription. A photograph contains both too much and too little to give us an adequate impression of full artistic significance. It contains too much, in that it renders with entire impartiality all that has been exposed to the sensitized plate. It contains too little, in that it fails to arouse those

elements of adjustment and expectancy which play so large a part in the interpretation of what we see. It is the problem of art to represent two things: all that is essential of the object, and all that is essential to a proper understanding of it. The first of these desiderata artists have long realized. They have exercised great freedom in simplifying and arranging their compositions, in order that distracting details might be eliminated and important factors duly emphasized. But what they have not always realized in so great a degree is the need for suggesting in a perfectly definite manner the precise attitude of expectancy which is necessary to place the spectator in direct *rapproch* with the idea which they have chosen to express. This second problem is much more difficult than the first, and in order to solve it satisfactorily the artist must bring his conception to the lowest possible level of human intercourse.

It is precisely this fact which gives us the key to the saying of Jesus. It is precisely this which accounts for the naive and childlike quality to be found in the work of the Post Impressionists. Almost jejune it appears at times, yet however ridiculously bare and crude it may seem on first view, it frequently possesses a veracity and a living quality which no amount of detail and meticulous finish is able to effect.

In his volume on the *Problem of Form*—one of the few essays by an artist which really strike in an intelligible way at the underlying principles of art—Adolf Hildebrand, the eminent sculptor, has made note of the essentially childlike vision of the artist. He says: “If we but consider that the artistic idea is in essence nothing more than a further evolution in the natural process of learning to see—a process which each one of us begins to perform in childhood; and if we remember that in childhood visual imagery is most vivid; then we may gain some idea of the sudden end to all this play of fancy which must follow the child’s entrance into school. For school turns the much-prized hours of youth to activities and disciplines inimical to art. Deflected thus from his natural course, the child develops his artificial rather than his natural resources, and it is only when he reaches full maturity that the artist learns to think

again in terms of the natural forces and ideas which in his childhood were his happiest possession."

It is a definite attempt to regain this childlike manner of apprehensions which characterizes the method of the Post Impressionists. In order that they may express themselves more forcibly and more directly, they have given to their work a touch of childish brevity. The broad outlines, the flat masses of solid color, the simple rhythms, or "repeats," in the somewhat formal pattern of their design, all emphasize these long-discarded efforts of a youthful imagination in its first craving for pictorial expression. But it would be futile to attempt a return to such manifest crudities, were it not for the fact that a suggestive truth lurks among them,—an elusive something which is powerfully stimulating to the imagination and the understanding. Thus we find, to our surprise, that the broad and realistic strokes used to set off a figure from its background, instead of rendering it false and inartistic, give it an emphasis which it otherwise seems to lack, and a reality which is all the more real because it is quite distinct from the realism which we associate with naturalism, inasmuch as it belongs rather to that more fundamental realism of the mental concept.

It has been noted that in painting a circular object in perspective—for instance, a dish—the elliptical form which it assumes in geometrical projection is unsuited to give us the essential quality of its actual rotundity. If, on the other hand, it is depicted as an oblongish form, we seem to derive from it a more acute realization of its spatial import. This fact is closely akin to the child's method of picturing. In drawing a table he is apt to represent first the square top, because that is the most essential feature of his knowledge about tables. The legs which he adds at the four corners are necessarily displaced from their actual relation to the top, because he has no third dimension in which to sink them. But the fact remains that the essential features of the table are there, though a satisfactory representation is not achieved. The use of an oblongish form to represent what would be geometrically projected as an ellipse, gains its veracity from the fact that the real surface-content of the dish is better depicted in this manner than it is by an ellipse. The el-

lipse is an abstraction obtained from a surface which is actually round. The oblong is a compromise which does justice both to the perspective view and also to the real surface-content, inasmuch as oblongs are more frequently met with as surface forms than are ellipses.

Thus we have seen that the criticism which tends to discredit the work of the Post Impressionists because of its ugliness and its incompleteness is unintelligent and invalid. The intrinsically ugly, when subjected to artistic treatment, may possess a quality of æsthetic interest which far surpasses the interest awakened by types of perfection. Indeed, the suggestion of states of mind and action depends in large measure upon factors which are almost totally eliminated in the representation of form for its own sake. Yet this does not mean that beauty of form is a negligible factor in art, but only that it is one among many other factors, each possessing its own peculiar significance. We are accustomed to refer to Greek sculpture as the acme of formal beauty in representation. Our ideals of classic form have been largely derived from Greek productions. One needs, however, only to compare a Greek Venus with her average modern imitation constructed in the 'classic manner,' to realize how far short of this ideal the modern sculptor has come. The sense of life, the vibrating, palpitating flesh which clothes the Greek statue, is entirely absent in the cold and austere stone of the modern. And this because—it is Rodin who noticed it—the Greek sculptor realized what his modern imitator did not, namely, that an infinite variety in surface values is essential to this living result. The smooth texture of the modern stone encases no soul, suggests no animation, while the minute but always meaningful variations in the surface of a Greek torso are the very factors which make even a fragment of the original statue alive in every part. It is just these living qualities to be derived from texture, line, surface, and color which are so strikingly in evidence in the paintings of the Post Impressionists. Indeed, so much are they in evidence that often a great deal has been sacrificed in the way of formal beauty in an effort to drive their meaning home.

So, too, with regard to the scantness of their detail and the

unaccustomed breadth of their treatment. What seems at first glance to be only the result of poverty of invention, giving rise to the often-heard comment that a child could do as well, will bear a closer scrutiny. A work of art is measured not so much by the abundance which it offers, as by the significance of the resultant whole. Instead of being bungling artisans, these painters are often superb draughtsmen who have simply chosen to depict the minimum of form values in their effort to achieve the maximum of expressiveness. That they have always succeeded in their attempt it would be folly to maintain. What we should look for in their work is rather the thought and action for which they have sacrificed so much of the conventional in painting. We must not look to them for masterpieces. What they have given is necessarily tentative. It remains for their successors who have learned more fully to comprehend their unique point of view to manipulate these factors into bigger and more monumental results.

But fairly certain we may be, if what has been said in their defense is soundly argued, that the ideas and aims of this group of contemporary artists bear the impress of a real contribution to art. It would not be surprising if future generations should look back upon the surviving remnants of these curious expressions as the foundation-stones of an art which for them will have long since achieved the distinction of orthodoxy, and about which will have long been hung the ample mantle of the classical spirit. For, after all, the classic is only that which has gained universal acceptance. The narrower meanings of artistic *genres*, among which the classic is treated as one, are but minor affairs when compared with the all-embracing concept of artistic truth, which, levelling all lesser differences, makes Art one both in aim and achievement. Just as we to-day look back upon the primitives of the early Italian Renaissance, not only for the crude beginnings of our art of painting, but also for fresh and inspiring suggestions of truth and beauty,—so may we imagine those of a later generation admiring with unprejudiced enthusiasm these pioneer efforts towards an enlargement of our own artistic horizon.

Innovations in art win their way but slowly, for artistic tradi-

tion is conservative in a sense only slightly less emphatic than is the conservatism of religion. Yet time inevitably modifies both, selecting the true, discarding the false. And elements of truth, even of a new truth, half realized though it be, are surely to be found in the works which we have been discussing. It is perhaps too much to ask that we should find in them now that which we have so long associated only with formal beauty, but it is also too little to ask that we should regard them with a mere tolerance as the half-mad utterances of a restless, aimless spirit. For precisely here, in the manifold possibilities of these scant achievements, rests a hope that our age may yet be classed among those which have pushed beyond the narrow confines of academic tradition into the unexplored regions of the Art which is to be.

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